

Unleash Your Most Creative Self with Mind/body Exercise

by Elizabeth Shimer

As an artist, you know nothing will block your artistic flow faster than stressful thoughts of work, family, friends, etc. To be at your most imaginative, both your mind and your body must be relaxed and at peace.

"In this stressed society, we all have a monkey chattering in our minds and it's very difficult to quiet the monkey," says Gail Evo, integrative medicine coordinator at Beaumont Cancer Institute. "There is a true mind-body connection, and when that monkey is up there jabbering away, it puts you into a constant fight or flight stress response," she says. "And when you're in fight or flight, you cannot relax and access your subconscious mind—the part of your brain that gives you the creative capacity."

One of the best things an artist can do is to clear the clutter from his or her mind is to learn how to enter a state of "flow" with more ease, says Carolyn Kaufman, PsyD, professor of psychology at Columbus State Community College in Ohio. "Flow" is a term coined by creative guru and psychology Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to refer to complete absorption in a task, the 'time flew by and I was so productive' feeling we get when we're in a truly creative state," she says. Luckily, there are many things you can do to clear your mind and relax in order to fully immerse yourself in your craft.

One of the best things you can do to elicit relaxation is a form of mind/body exercise. And beyond putting you in a better mental state to be artistic, these practices are all excellent for your health and overall well-being. "No form of mind/body exercise is better than another," says Evo. "It's very personal. You might have to try a few forms before you find the one that resonates with you." Here are just some of the mind/body exercises that will put you in a state of relaxation and encourage creative "flow."

Tap into creativity with tai chi

"Tai chi, which is a slow moving exercise based on the movements of the martial art kung fu, is great for both the mind and body," says Ron Knaus, D.O., psychiatrist, sports medicine physician in Florida and author of *A B Chi*, a book that spells out the principles and practices of tai chi.

"Tai chi is the most advanced form of a martial art, known as a passive martial art. It has become an exercise for the prevention of health problems and the promotion of mental abilities," says



Dr. Ron Knaus shows the movements done during tai chi. He is a psychiatrist and sport medicine physician.

Dr. Knaus. He says the best way to learn and practice tai chi is with an instructor. "But find an instructor who is a little more laid back and just happy you are moving—some are obsessive-compulsive with position, which isn't fun for beginners," he says. "And some instructors demand you learn the whole form of tai chi, which can take months. But you can really learn all you need to know in thirty days to last a lifetime."

Studies show tai chi increases relaxation and concentration. "And tai chi increases brain growth. We're finding in brain research that if the mind is challenged in new ways, it will grow brain tissue," Dr. Knaus says. Tai chi challenges the mind by forcing your brain to know where your hands and feet are at all times. "It is meditation in motion," Dr. Knaus says.

You don't have to take much time out of your busy schedule to practice tai chi. "Once or twice a day for ten minutes at a time will give you plenty of benefits—relaxation, increased concentration, balance, and better breathing and alignment," Dr. Knaus says. "People who work on crafts sit a lot and often begin to slouch, so the posture and alignment benefits are key," he adds. Traditionally, tai chi has been done at sunrise and/or sunset, but you can do it any time of the day to reap the rewards.

Mellow with meditation

"Meditation, or the absence of thought, works similarly to other mind/body exercises to relax the body," Evo says. "Meditation is a wonderful discipline, but it is challenging—you have to be able to sit for twenty to thirty minutes with no thought," she says. To meditate successfully, Evo says first, be patient. And if you try it for a few weeks and find you are still struggling, try guided imagery. "Guided imagery involves someone guiding you into a similar state you would be in when you meditate," she says. "And if an artist is having a mental block, a guided imagery specialist can create a CD just for that person to elicit relaxation so the artist can put the busy monkey mind to rest and tap into his or her subconscious."

Flex your mind with yoga

Yoga is similar to tai chi in that it reduces fatigue in the body, increases flexibility, helps decrease physical and emotional stress, and contributes to a sense of peace. "There is a cerebral/spiritual element to yoga that makes it interesting for people who get bored with other sports or workout routines," says April Masini, advice columnist who practices yoga (www.AskApril.com). "And you don't need a lot of equipment—just a mat and some loose fitting clothing."

Evo points out there are many different forms of yoga—high aerobic forms and softer forms. "For artists to increase creative potential, I recommend the more gentle form of Hatha yoga," she says.

Balance your energy

"Energy balancing techniques are based on the premise Einstein proved to us—every cell is composed of over ninety percent energy," Evo says. "We also know from scientific photography that the human body actually emits an energetic field," she says. And techniques like Reiki, healing touch, therapeutic touch, acupuncture and acupressure can all do wonders for balancing the energy in your body. "Plus, energy balancing techniques are very, very relaxing," she says.



Photos courtesy of Beaumont Hospitals. Therapeutic touch can do wonders for balancing the energy in your body, helping you unleash your creativity effectively.

Work up a creative sweat

If calm, gentle exercises such as yoga or tai chi don't get you going, you can also get mind/body relaxation benefits from more strenuous forms of exercise, such as brisk walking, jogging, biking or swimming. "Aerobic exercise causes an increase in the 'feel good' chemicals in your body, including serotonin (mood), norepinephrine (energy), and dopamine (pleasure)," says Dr. Kaufman. "These exercises also release endogenous opioids, which are what give people the 'runner's high,'" she says.

As an artist, whether you find the most creative inspiration from tai chi, yoga, meditation, or running, you can also have a lot of fun doing it. "Finding the mind/body exercise that works for you can be a real discovery—it can totally change your lifestyle," Evo says. **TCR**

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